Mazes in Myth

Valkyrie

I've been working with the labyrinth myths and stories myself. And there is another version or way of viewing the Maiden at the center of the labyrinth that I thought you might be interested in. The maze/labyrinth theme is central not only to the Celtic legends, but the Norse and others besides European. In some of the turf/snow games still played with the 'classical' unicursal labyrinth the Maiden at the center is guarded or held by a troll.

In the symbolic analysis of the hero rescuing the maiden from the labyrinth there is the concept of the hero going through a rebirth process and recapturing the feminine, intuitive side of his nature (according to folks who like to do this sort of thing). In many of the later Grail stories, the hero soon abandons the feminine, rejecting it. Those that don't are the ones who remained with the old faith, with the "abandoning" ones the ones who rejected the feminine and went with the male dominant religion of Christianity.

The maze can be interchangeable with a dragon or serpent in the same sort of stories as meaning basically the same thing, since the labyrinth is a symbol of a descent and ascent of death and rebirth through the Earth Mother. Old Anglo-Saxon castles were guarded by mounds of earth with basically the same name as dragon. At the center of the Underworld maze is also found the castle and the Cauldron of Regeneration or Plenty.

Women undergoing the traditional challenge and initiation comparable to the Underground journey, were "given" to the trolls. The trolls, being the underground guardians (and not the nasty demons Tolkein and other Christians made them out to be...just ask any Swede) taught the girl secrets as she "served" in the Underworld, in many legends for Frau Holle, who has many well-known counterparts, including Hel, Annwyn, Hecate and others. This is a fairly well known theme in fairy tales also, but not as well recognized as being an initiatory story as the Heroic journeys are.

In many Northern folk tales, a girl is "given" to the trolls, or abandoned in the woods. In some stories she with her brother, in others she is alone, and the hunter is told to kill her. This journey into the wilderness is the beginning of her wandering through the maze. Or in some of the stories she is taken to a castle and beset with tasks that she must accomplish in order to "marry" the king or prince. She spins straw into gold with the help of the trolls, dwarfs or gnomes, all names for the Underworld beings who guard the fertility of the Upperworld. The spinning of straw into gold is the power of insuring the crops come to fruitful harvest as the grass winds through the season to gold. She is usually set three tasks by either the King who will marry her, or the Queen Mother of the Prince.

When she accomplishes the tasks set for her, she "claims" the masculine side of herself and "marries" or becomes united with her masculine side.

The story is told in different ways, but the journey to the center of the labyrinth/maze is form of the Spiral Dance of life and death. One of the themes that is found in conjunction with these stories are the ones that have the "poison" apple in them. The apple was a symbol of life and rebirth for many ancient cultures. Apples were associated with the Roman/Etruscan goddess Pomona, the Greek Hera, Demeter, Morgan in her Crone form in Celtic legends, and Holle or Hel in Norse and Germanic legends. Idunn was the Maiden form of Holle or Hel, who kept the apples of immortality in a basket. In the Volsung Saga it tells of the belief that a man could be preserved in death by the apples given to him by his wife. In other legends children are conceived after eating a magical apple. When the Bible was translated, the apple of life and death was found in the Garden of Idunn.

The Apple, Rose and Hawthorn are all members of the same family. The Hawthorne, especially as a hedge or protective enclosure is found with the maze, either protecting it, or actually forming the walls. They are sacred trees/plants, the first to begin blooming in the spring. The Hawthorn is especially sacred because it can have blossoms, ripe fruit and ripening fruit on it at all times, as well as protective thorns. I'm posting from the Seattle, Washington area of the United States.

Blessings
V

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